

Issues that govt needs to shore up to attract FDI

THE decline of foreign direct investment to a decade's low in the 2023-24 financial year raises concern and warrants the attention of authorities. The foreign direct investment declined by 8.80 per cent to \$1.47 billion from \$1.6 billion in the 2023 financial year, as the Bangladesh Bank says. The figure was \$3.44 billion in the 2022 financial year. The FDI flow to Bangladesh has, in fact, been lower than most of its South Asian neighbours. Bangladesh's average FDI flow was around 0.4 per cent of its gross domestic product compared with that of 1.5 per cent in India and 1.2 per cent in Sri Lanka. This shows the weakness in overall management in attracting foreign direct investment. Negative credit rating, dollar shortage, political uncertainty, the devaluation of the taka, import restrictions, bureaucratic tangles and corruption are blamed for the plight of FDI flow. Bangladesh could, moreover, not retain its earlier foreign direct investment as old investors were pulling investments back or repatriating profits, as the UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2023 shows. The UNCTAD report also identifies Bangladesh as the non-investment-grade country for the least developed countries. Such identification, believed to make FDI inflow difficult, has been made because of the demotion in sovereign credit rating.

The United States-based international credit rating agency Moody's Investors Service, for example, downgraded Bangladesh's long-term ratings to B1 from Ba3 in May 2023. The rating agency said that Bangladesh had heightened external vulnerability, persistent liquidity risks and institutional weaknesses and a poor rating in the ease of doing business. Bangladesh's ranking in the ease of doing business, crucial for potential foreign investors, is the 168th among 190 economies. Such a poor rating has eroded foreign investor's confidence and resulted in low FDI flow. The decline in foreign direct investment flow has, meanwhile, forced the country to rely largely on income from exports, remittances and loans from multilateral and bilateral lenders to maintain the balance of payment that has been under pressure since 2022. The interim government, which assumed office after the fall of the Awami League regime, now faces an uphill task to win back investor's confidence and push up the FDI flow. The Investment Development Authority is reported to be soon taking some steps to boost investor's confidence. Among the steps are captive power options for foreign direct investors and a new investment advisory board to guide the FDI strategy. It is also likely to propose steps to streamline goods transport, enhance transparency and reduce bureaucratic tangles.

Bangladesh has been attracting foreign direct investment since the economic reform in 1995, but the country lags way behind its neighbours. Against the target of a 3 per cent FDI-GDP ratio, foreign direct investment has stayed at less than 1 per cent. The government, therefore, needs to address the issues and ensure a business-friendly atmosphere to attract more foreign direct investment. It should also try to channel the investments to labour-intensive sectors to avoid jobless growth.

Govt should put plans in place to head off tech-drive job loss

THE Fourth Industrial Revolution, setting in across the world bringing about a new order dominated by technology, could well leave its impact, sooner or later, on Bangladesh even if it would opt to stay out of it. Bangladesh should, therefore, align itself towards the shift while there is still time as graduation of society into another industrial revolution will come with job losses. The report of a study on the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on workers and employment and the need for inclusive policies, made public in a symposium in Dhaka on November 16, fears that the automation that the revolution would bring about could displace 60 per cent of the work force in the apparel and the textile sector in Bangladesh from their traditional role by 2041. What is good about it is that it might create a significant number of new types of jobs in the sector. Yet, as the study shows, up to half a million jobs at the operator level in the apparel and textile sectors would be at risk. About 10,000 positions at the mid-level such as floor supervisors and pattern makers and 10,000 more positions that require high skills such as fashion designers, computer-aided design and manufacturing operators would also be at risk.

The machine-to-human work ration is reported to have been at 44:66 but it is feared that the ratio would reach 57:43 by 2035. The study report also highlights that job loss because of automation by way of the Fourth Industrial Revolution would cut across five major industries — the apparel and the furniture sector with a projected job loss by a half, the agro-food processing industry with a reduction in job by 40 per cent, the leather sector by 35 per cent and the tourism sector by 20 per cent. The report says that automation of the apparel and the textile sector is creating new jobs that combine technology with traditional manufacturing processes. Jobs in customer services, retail checkout, data entry, assembly lines and translation are increasingly replaced with technology. And, prominent emerging occupations include professionals skilled in computer-aided processes, quality control, training, automated inspection and handling. Artificial neural network experts, robot operators, numerical controllers, enterprise resource planning experts would also be in high demand. All this shows an urgent need for the government to buckle down to work to scale up the skills of workers and their re-employment in view of both short- and long-term risks of the new industrial wave.

The government should, in such a situation, work out plans to scale up the skills of workers and re-employ them to head off the impact of the job loss that the automation coming up with the Fourth Industrial Revolution could cause. It should involve workers, trade unions and civil society actors in planning. More important, it should execute the plans for an effective result.

Voting machines and democracy

by Kollol Kibria

THE demand for free, fair and transparent elections has become pronounced. The issue is reflected in a decision of the interim government to form the election commission reforms committee. Tasked with revamping the election commission to enhance its independence, transparency and public trust, the committee work represents a critical step towards restoring confidence in the electoral process.

One of the most significant reform opportunities involves the potential expansion of electronic voting machines throughout the country, along with the integration of the voter verifiable paper audit trail technology. By enabling voters to verify that the ballots are recorded accurately, the paper trail adds a layer of transparency and accountability, which could help to mitigate electoral fraud and restore voter confidence.

Additionally, the government has taken proactive measures to ensure the reform process is inclusive and transparent. A six-member search committee has been instituted to form a new election commission that would reflect the values of impartiality, accountability and independence. The search committee is expected to recommend individuals with a proven commitment to democratic principles, integrity and the ability to resist political pressure.

For Bangladesh, such electoral reforms and technological advancements hold the promise of not only a more transparent election process but also a reinforced democratic system that can withstand internal and external challenges. A successful implementation of the reforms would set a standard for the region, emphasising the importance of credible institutions in upholding democracy and the rule of law. With these efforts, the government demonstrates its resolve to steer Bangladesh towards a future where elections would truly reflect the will of the people.

Voting machines and paper trail

THE 2010 incident involving Hari Prasad, an Indian citizen, who stole an electronic voting machine from the Election Commission of India and demonstrated its vulnerabilities with the assistance of teachers from the University of Michigan underscores the reality that no electoral system is completely secure from threats. Their experiments showed significant risks, including the poten-



tial for tampering with the electronic voting machine's motherboard before inspection.

In response to such vulnerabilities, the introduction of the voter verifiable paper audit trail provides a critical safeguard, allowing votes to be independently verified through a physical paper trail. This feature ensures that any tampering with the electronic system can be detected and addressed during audits or recounts, thereby enhancing the overall security and integrity of the electoral process.

Bangladesh's electoral framework already incorporates various safeguards, such as pre-election checks of electronic voting machines conducted in the presence of political party representatives, who seal and sign the machines, complicating any attempts at post-check tampering. The integration of paper audit trail further strengthens this security by enabling a manual verification of votes. When a voter casts the vote using the voting machine, the machine prints out a paper, which is then displayed to the voter for verification before being securely stored in a sealed box. This paper trail allows voters to confirm their choice, thus adding an essential layer of accountability and transparency crucial for audits and recounts in the event of disputes.

For example, during an election, voters might select their preferred candidates on the machine. After making the selection, the paper audit trail component produces a paper slip that

shows the voter's choice. The voters can visually confirm that the printout reflects their intended selection before the slip is dropped into a secure ballot box. This process allows for manual verification if any issues arise, such as claims of the machine malfunction or allegations of hacking. The paper audit trail serves as an irrefutable means of resolution, allowing election officials to cross-check electronic votes against the physical records.

Countries such as the United States have effectively integrated paper audit trail into the electronic voting system, demonstrating its role in enhancing transparency and ensuring the accuracy of election results. Even Hari Prasad, who initially brought attention to the machine's vulnerabilities, now advocates the integration of paper audit trail as a means to bolster electoral integrity.

Legal and constitutional backing

BANGLADESH'S legal framework provides for robust support for the use of electronic voting machines. Article 118 of the constitution grants the Election Commission the autonomy to conduct elections while the Representation of the People Order 1972 empowers the commission to adopt technologies such as electronic voting machines to minimise electoral frauds. This legal foundation enables the government and the commission to effectively implement voting machines and paper audit trail to ensure that the elections are conducted transparently and securely.

Are voting machines non-hackable?

WHILE voting machines in Bangladesh operate offline, significantly reducing external hacking risks, concerns about internal tampering or technical malfunctions remain. As with any technology, it is important to acknowledge that no system is entirely immune to threats. Labelling voting machines as 'non-hackable' would be misleading. However, the measures put in place such as the first-level checks and security seals make it nearly impossible to rig elections. Furthermore, voter verified paper audit trail offers a reliable safeguard, providing for a physical backup that can be manually verified in the event of any dispute.

Phased rollout and public education

A PHASED rollout is the most practical approach to ensure a successful implementation of voting machines and paper audit trail across Bangladesh. Starting in urban constituencies, where voters are more familiar with technology, will help to identify and address technical issues before extending the use of electronic voting machines to rural areas. Equally important is the need for comprehensive voter education initiatives and training of election officials. By making voters with voting machines and paper audit trail, the Election Commission can minimise confusion about the election day and reduce the likelihood of technical failures to ensure a smooth voting process.

Call for constructive dialogue

THE introduction of voting machines and paper audit trail represents a forward-thinking step towards strengthening democracy in Bangladesh. While no system is entirely free of risks, integrating the technologies supported by legal safeguards, voter education and transparent oversight can significantly enhance electoral integrity.

As Bangladesh approaches its next general elections, it is crucial for all stakeholders, including the government, the commission and the public, to engage in constructive dialogues about the future of voting in the country. By working together, Bangladesh can ensure that its elections remain credible, transparent and reflective of the will of the people. With right reforms and the implementation of modern technologies, Bangladesh has the opportunity to build a strong, more inclusive democracy for future.

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Has Kamala Harris abided by her parents' advice?

by Md Mahmudul Hasan

WAS in the neighbouring city of Milwaukee during the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC) that took place in Chicago on August 19-22. We all knew that Kamala Harris would be the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in the November 5, 2024 US election and that she would give a candidacy acceptance speech before the DNC delegates.

From various US cities, a large block of uncommitted delegates — largely composed of anti-genocide and pro-justice groups from all backgrounds — flocked to Chicago with two purposes in mind: 1) to attend the convention and 2) to voice their concerns about Israel's mass atrocity and genocide in Gaza (and now in Lebanon). They were very hopeful that, using the DNC platform, they would be able to record their dissatisfaction with the US government's handling of the crisis.

The uncommitted delegates were in conversation with the convention organisers. They demanded their protest against the US unconditional support for Israel be heard, and initially they saw a ray of hope that they would have a slot at the convention to speak their minds.

Unfortunately, the DNC eventually turned down their request without providing a satisfactory explanation. Conversely, it rightly allowed among others parents of an Israeli hostage in Gaza to use the convention rostrum to make 'moving remarks.' This act of inclusion and exclusion sent a clear message that voices of justice for the Palestinians or votes of Palestinian Americans didn't matter to the Democratic Party.

This is despite the fact that the Cook County where the venue of the convention — the United Center — is located has the largest Palestinian community in the US. Moreover, from early October 2023 to the convention date, Israel had slaughtered over 40,000 Palestinian babies, children, women and men in addition to hundreds of journalists, healthcare providers and UN aid workers (the numbers are now much higher). All the gruesome images coming out of Palestine didn't seem to move the Democratic Party establishment to sympathise with the plight of the Palestinians.

Betrayed and frustrated, peaceful



Kamala Harris

anti-genocide protesters staged a sit-in outside the United Center. Inside the convention, Israeli voices were given a monopoly to tell the audience their version of the decades-long Israel-Palestine conflict. A Palestinian voice was denied the platform to self-represent and make the sufferings of the Palestinians heard and acknowledged. A push for a cease-fire in Gaza and for a US arms embargo on Israel was out of the question.

On the last day of the convention (August 22, 2024), Kamala Harris stepped onto the stage to deliver the nomination acceptance speech and to mark the end of the convention. In her address, she provided an autobiographical sketch of her early life. She shared her childhood memories of joy and struggle. In her reminiscences, she recalled that her father Donald J Harris taught her to be fearless. He once said to her:

'Run, Kamala. Run. Don't be afraid. Don't let anything stop you.'

Kamala Harris paid a greater tribute to her mother Shyamala Gopalan Harris for the understandable reason that the latter mostly raised the former. Harris told the convention that her mother taught her 'to never complain about injustice but do something about it, DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.'

Given the content of her DNC speech in Chicago, Kamala Harris failed to be an obedient daughter on account of the precious advice she claimed she had received from her parents. She failed to be brave and courageous on the question of Israeli apartheid and settler colonialism. She apparently let the unmatched power and influence of the Israel lobby in America 'stop' her from telling the truth about Israel's gross human rights violations.

Being a politician and legal scholar, Harris is very much aware of Israel's violations of international laws including the Geneva Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. An honest lawyer cannot regurgitate the Israel's-right-to-defend cliché and keep their mouth shut about the crimes committed by the apartheid state.

Harris's mother taught her to do something about injustice. As the 49th and the first female vice president of the US, Harris holds certain powers and prerogatives within the country's federal administration. An unavoidable question that arises is:

What has she done to end the ongoing Israeli injustices?

On this issue, undoubtedly, Harris betrayed the Palestinians and disobeyed her parents. She offered only platitudes and lip service regarding the

importance of sending humanitarian aid to Gaza but did nothing to stop the bombardment and slaughter of Gazans and UN aid workers. Worse, she is part of an administration that has continued supplying armaments and military equipment to Israel for killing and destroying an infinite number of Palestinian (and now Lebanese) lives.

On Kamala Harris's watch, the supporters of justice for Palestine have been marginalised within the Democratic Party. On multiple occasions, she refused to break away from President Joe Biden's policy of aiding and abetting Israeli intransigence and war crimes. The Biden-Harris administration even didn't put pressure on Israel to let US and other journalists enter Gaza and report what has been happening there. Nor did it use its power to force Israel to allow the airlifting of the injured from the genocide site for treatment purposes.

In her attempt to court female voters, Kamala Harris often brought up gender issues in her speeches and portrayed herself as a champion of women's rights. But she showed no regard for the rights to life and dignity of Palestinian women and their children and husbands. Thus, the question of Palestine has exposed the hypocrisy of 'feminists' like Kamala Harris.

Kamala Harris thought that caricaturing, denigrating, mocking and satirising Donald Trump alone would win her the election. She proved wrong and lost it to him. In a nutshell, by ignoring the plea for justice for the Palestinians, she insulted the intelligence of conscientious people in the US and around the world. She should have reassured the electorate that she would uphold human rights and justice both at home and internationally. That would have inspired a multitude of people to rally around her and could have won her the election.

On a final note, I hope, after entering the White House as the 47th president of the United States, President Donald Trump will take emergency measures to rein in Israel's genocidal behaviour and will not repeat Biden-Harris's mistakes.

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